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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 RANGOON 000481

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [BM](#)

SUBJECT: BURMA: BEYOND THE ASEAN CHAIR ISSUE

REF: A. VIENTIANE 429

[1](#)B. PHNOM PENH 644

[1](#)C. RANGOON 400 AND PREVIOUS

[1](#)D. 04 RANGOON 471

Classified By: COM Carmen Martinez for Reasons 1.4 (b,d)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: In contrast to considerable regional commentary focused on the scheduled rotation in 2006 of the ASEAN chair to Burma, the military regime's top generals have been silent. Than Shwe and Maung Aye will be extremely reluctant to miss out on the "glory" and legitimacy afforded by hosting the ASEAN Summit and related events. Although it is conceivable they could take a face-saving pass on the basis that the GOB is "too preoccupied" with its "road map to a disciplined democracy," the generals will not bow out in direct reaction to international pressure.

[1](#)2. (C) If the SPDC skips the chair rotation, the generals will be further isolated and suffer some damage to their pride, but in the process they will also avoid a boycott of Rangoon-hosted ASEAN events and forestall an ASEAN confrontation on the need for fundamental political change in Burma. Safely out of the spotlight, the SPDC will likely prolong the detention of Aung San Suu Kyi and other high-profile political prisoners for the foreseeable future. We advise formulating a strategy now to ensure that ASEAN members look beyond the immediate resolution of the chairmanship question. End Summary.

[1](#)3. (U) Although individual ASEAN member states, and the international press, have devoted considerable commentary in recent weeks to issues related to the scheduled rotation of the ASEAN chair to Burma in 2006 (refs A-C), the military regime's top generals have been mostly silent. During an early April visit to Vietnam, Prime Minister Lt Gen Soe Win said cryptically that "it will all be OK" in response to reporters who raised concerns that Burma's chairmanship could damage the regional organization. However, the regime's official press has given no indication that the SPDC has altered plans to take on the chair next year.

[1](#)4. (C) According to press reports, Cambodia's Prince Norodom Ranariddh told reporters in Phnom Penh on April 21, apparently with conviction, that "because of internal problems, Myanmar has agreed not to host the ASEAN summit next year, and in the future Myanmar will announce it." However, Cambodia's Ambassador to Burma, Hul Phany, told the COM and P/E chief on April 26 that he had not heard about any such pronouncement by the National Assembly President and that Cambodia's official position, "as expressed publicly by Prime Minister Hun Sen, is to support (Burma's) rightful turn as ASEAN chair."

[1](#)5. (C) Ambassador Phany added that Prince Ranariddh would address publicly the ASEAN chair issue "only if he had coordinated in advance with Hun Sen." He acknowledged that Soe Win and Hun Sen had held a private one-hour bilateral meeting on April 8, "with note takers only, not even the Foreign Ministers were present," and it was uncertain what the two Prime Ministers had discussed.

[1](#)6. (C) Despite the Cambodian Ambassador's skepticism, Prince Ranariddh's surprising announcement appears to corroborate GOC information offered to Embassy Phnom Penh that Soe Win purportedly informed Hun Sen that Burma would give up its turn as ASEAN chair (ref B). However, at an April 22 regime-controlled "press conference" in Rangoon, a Japanese journalist asked for a reaction to Prince Ranariddh's announcement and Minister of Information Brig Gen Kyaw Hsan responded: "As it is too early, I cannot say anything by myself; when the time comes, the Government will address the issue."

[1](#)7. (C) It is entirely possible that Hun Sen and Soe Win discussed the ASEAN chair issue in Phnom Penh, but it is unlikely that the SPDC's top leadership has already made a final decision. Chairman Than Shwe and Vice Chairman Maung Aye will be extremely reluctant to miss out on the "glory" and legitimacy afforded by hosting the ASEAN Summit and related events in 2006-2007, no matter what the prognosis is

for further international pressure and tensions within ASEAN.  
Past regime practice portends an eleventh hour decision on this issue.

Comment: Look Beyond, the Albatross Remains

18. (C) We continue to assess that if the SPDC generals relinquish the opportunity to chair ASEAN it would be only on their own terms and in their own perceived best interests. While it is conceivable they could take a face-saving pass on the basis that the GOB is "too preoccupied" with the National Convention and with the rest of the regime's "road map to a disciplined democracy" (their perennial excuse for inaction on many issues), the generals will not bow out in reaction to international pressure or indirect prodding from other ASEAN members.

19. (C) If the SPDC skips the ASEAN chair rotation, the regime will be further isolated and the generals will certainly suffer some damage to their pride. However, in the process they will also avoid a U.S.-led boycott of Rangoon-hosted events and the generals will again forestall a day of reckoning for ASEAN that forces the organization to finally confront the Burma problem in a meaningful manner.

110. (C) To a certain extent, ASEAN is poised to lose some immediate leverage to demand fundamental changes to regime behavior, particularly with regard to human rights and political dialogue (safely out of the spotlight, the SPDC will likely prolong the detention of Aung San Suu Kyi and other high-profile political prisoners for the foreseeable future). We advise formulating a strategy now to ensure that ASEAN members look beyond the immediate resolution of the chairmanship question, accept that the Burma problem will not go away, and undertake serious steps to press the Burmese regime toward genuine reform. End Comment.  
Martinez